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SUBJECT: TALABANI GIVES PUK DEPUTIES EQUAL AUTHORITY - TALK
OF PUK SUCCESSION

REF: BAGHDAD 3776

Classified By: Political Minister Counselor Robert S. Ford for reasons
1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY. Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) leaders have denied press reports that PUK General Secretary Jalal Talabani has been removed from power. As a result of recent PUK leadership meetings, Talabani empowered both KRG VP Kosrat Rasoul and DPM Barham Salih with equal authority to manage PUK affairs. With Talabani busy in Baghdad, PUK internal power squabbles have festered and demands for reform have gone unanswered. This move is important in that it identifies Barham Salih and Kosrat Rasoul as front runners for the PUK General Secretary-ship in a post-Talabani scenario, and also highlights DPM Salih as a possible successor to Talabani as Iraqi president. Given Talabani's poor health, these moves underline the seriousness of the PUK's internal succession problems. Despite the emergence of front runners, neither of these men will be able to truly replace Talabani and it remains possible that the party could fracture when he passes on. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) On December 3, the Iraq Independent News Agency reported that President Talabani was removed from his position as PUK Secretary General. Talabani's Advisor Aram Yarwessi vehemently denied this report to PolOff, clarifying that the PUK leadership meetings have resulted in the establishment of 6 committees to tackle reform and a five point instruction letter empowering Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) Vice President Kosrat Rasoul and Deputy Prime Minister Barham Salih with equal authority to manage PUK affairs on Talabani's behalf. On December 4, DPM's Aide Lawen Hawezy echoed Yarwessi's comments. Salih himself talked to us while he was attending the December 3 PUK senior leadership meeting, and he denied the reports. In a follow-up phone call, Salih added that the PUK politburo enthusiastically endorsed these moves, giving Talabani a standing ovation. Salih stated that Talabani's position as PUK General Secretary was stronger than ever.

PUK INTERNAL SQUABBLES

13. (C) Many PUK contacts have told us that Talabani has neglected PUK internal power management and reform while serving as Iraq's President. In November, Yarwessi told PolOff that PUK meetings to address reform and corruption were long overdue and Talabani needed to take decisive action to keep the party intact. On December 2, Talabani traveled to Sulemaniyah to hold PUK senior leadership meetings. These meetings followed PUK discussions in October and November during which Talabani dismissed four PUK old guards and gave an ultimatum to Deputy General Secretary Nashirwan Mustafa to either stop criticizing Talabani or leave the PUK. To add insult to injury, Talabani generously had been funding Mustafa's media group "Wisha" that Mustafa used to publicly attack Talabani. Mustafa recently asked Senior Advisor Krajewski if the USG would provide financial support to his

party "the way you've funded other Kurdish parties in the past." S/A demurred, noting that the USG supported a number of civil society programs, including political capacity building. (REF A)

14. (C) PUK parliamentarian Friad Rwndzi confirmed November press reports about reconciliatory meetings between PUK Deputy General Secretary Nashirwan Mustafa and Talabani. According to Rwndzi, Mustafa is allowed to start his own party but cannot remain in PUK and continue to attack Talabani. However, Rwndzi clarified to PolOff that after presented with Talabani's ultimatum, Mustafa chose to stay. Presented with Talabani's ultimatum, Mustafa chose to stay within the PUK. The PUK politburo designated Omer Sheikh Mous to mediate these meetings taking place in Sulemaniyah this week. Kurdish Alliance Parliamentary Leader Fuad Massum, DPM Salih and Rwndzi warned Talabani not to enter into any agreements with Nashirwan alone. All terms will be put to paper with approval from Massum, Salih and Rwndzi.

15. (C) PUK squabbles have included relatives as well. On November 14, First Lady Hero Talabani brought her brother Halo Ibrahim Ahmed to Baghdad to mend fences between Halo and Talabani. Talabani and Halo have had long standing differences on Halo's role in the PUK. Halo is no longer in the PUK and wants back in, according to multiple PUK sources in October and November. On a December 3 visit to Sulemaniyah, Emboffs noticed Halo's absence from the PUK senior leadership meetings. There have been persistent rumors of the return of Talabani's son Qubad, too. Qubad has been in the United States for nearly 20 years, however, and despite his closeness to both his parents, and his considerable abilities, he is considered too far removed from

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local politics to contend for a leading party role at present.

16. (C) Rwndzi indicated to PolOff that PUK politburo members urged Talabani to expel PUK's "UK branch." He described the ouster of London-based Shorish Haji, Mala Khidir Mamend, Haval Kustani and Hishyar Abid as unfortunate because they were PUK co-founders and have places in Peshmerga history. Rwndzi admitted that both the PUK and Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) are fraught with corruption. "Party reform is okay from the inside but not from outside the party." He asserted that the way to conquer corruption and push for reform is not to launch personal attacks at Talabani.

PUK - BAGHDAD VS. SULEMANIYAH

17. (C) On December 7, Barham Salih pointed out to Poloff that the PUK split along Baghdad and Suleymaniah lines. He added that there is a growing perception among Kurds that Talabani is more concerned with national politics, ignoring the region's needs. He claimed that Baghdad PUK officials are more "Iraqi than Kurd." At the December 3 PUK senior leadership meeting in Sulemaniyah, Baghdad PUK members sat closest to Talabani while all other PUK politburo members were relegated to the distant seats. This again was demonstrated at the seating for lunch, at which Sulemaniyah PUK members were placed at the second table. Only Rasoul floated between the two groups.

PUK SUCCESSION

18. (S) Talabani's poor health has raised to the top the PUK's need to sort out its succession. Top KDP and PUK members agree that there are three possible General Secretary candidates: KRG Vice President Kosrat Rasoul, Deputy Prime Minister Barham Salih and former PUK Deputy General Secretary

Nashirwan Mustafa. On November 26, Rwandzi opined while the PUK old guard has a penchant for Nashirwan, his anti-Talabani attacks have pushed him out of consideration. On December 2, KRG Chief of Staff Fuad Hussein asserted that Kosrat Rasoul is ill (epilepsy), and that DPM Salih should emerge General Secretary. However, KRG PM Nechirvan Barzani told PolOff on December 2 that Salih lacks ties to the old guard and has not invested any time convincing them of his ability. The next day, Salih himself indicated to Poloff in December that PUK succession depends on PUK old guard approval. If he is to succeed to the PUK Chairmanship, Salih said he will have to spend more time in Sulemaniyah "kissing babies and shaking hands."

¶9. (S) Not only does PUK succession affect its internal power structure but also the delicate balance between PUK and KDP. With PUK leader Talabani as Iraq's President and KDP Masoud Barzani as KRG's President, Kurdish power sharing is preserved, at least for today. KDP officials Rowsch Shaways, KRG Chief of Staff Fuad Hussein, Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani and Director of Security Masrur Barzani in many conversations with us have said they think Barham Salih would be the most competent successor to Talabani. Looking at the national politics, Dr. Rowsch stated that Salih would be the logical choice to step into the Presidency if the Kurds are able to keep the presidency position after Talabani is gone. Dr. Fuad added, however, that if Salih became President of Iraq, he would not be an equal counterweight to Masoud Barzani in terms of internal Kurdish political dynamics. He speculated in order to preserve the PUK-KDP power balance the PUK would have to make some concessions (PUK ministries) to KDP at both the national and regional level.

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HANDPICKING THE FUTURE OF PUK

¶10. (C) Salih reported that the October and November PUK meetings also touched on recruitment for the party's future. Both Salih and Talabani decided to focus on education, in particular, recruitment of Iraq's best and brightest through the American University in Sulemaniyah. A pet project of DPM Salih's, he has travelled the country to personally congratulate the top students from various universities. By offering scholarships to these top students regardless of ethnicity or religious background, he hopes that upon graduation, they will sign on to PUK.

¶11. (C) While Talabani and Salih have made plans to recruit the top students, there are several personal aides, advisors and even parliamentarians who have already been selected to

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play a future role in PUK. For example, in 2005 Salih told PolOff that he selected one of parliament's youngest (32 yrs old) members, Tania Tal'at Muhammad Gilly from Kirkuk. According to Salih, Gilly epitomizes the modern Iraqi woman, speaks fluent Kurdish, Arabic and English, and is educated, secular, outspoken, and smart. She sits on parliament's Foreign Relations Committee and recently gained national recognition reading aloud portions of the US-Iraq Security Agreement for the November 27 parliamentary vote. Others are "legacy members" those whose parents were either Peshmerga or have close relationships with Talabani and the old guard. The son of a prominent academic and close friend of Talabani's, Lawen Hawezy came to work for DPM Salih in 2006. Twenty-six years old, half-way through a doctorate in economics, fluent in Kurdish, English and Dutch, dual-(Dutch) citizen Hawezy has plans to work for the World Bank and return to Iraq to work at the economic policy making level. Talabani's advisor, dual-(British) citizen Aram Shawkat Yarwessi speaks fluent Arabic, Kurdish and English. His father was killed by Saddam. Yarwessi has intimated that at some point in the future he expects to "get the call" to be a KRG minister. Talabani's former communications advisor, Hiwa

Osman, was selected to work for the Presidency Council because his father is a close Peshmerga friend of Talabani's.

In September, Osman told PolOff that he left due to GOI corruption and lack of effectiveness. He now heads an NGO that trains journalists in Iraq.

¶12. (C) COMMENT. These latest PUK internal maneuvers underscore the severity of the PUK,s succession problems. There is no replacement for MamJalal Talabani and the party could fracture when he passes on. The hard-fought and well-established power sharing agreement between the two main Kurdish parties will have to be restructured and it is likely that the more authoritarian and less-democratic KDP would gain power in the KRG and in Baghdad following elections next year. This would in turn set up the KDP, led by the often combative Masoud Barzani, for even more conflicts with the Baghdad government. Even the KDP leadership does not think this would be healthy for the KRG, or for relations with Arab parties in Baghdad. KRG PM Nechirvan Barzani recently told us - only half in jest - that the KDP,s plan for PUK succession was to persuade the aging and ill President to take better care of himself. KRG President Masoud Barzani expressed great concern that without MamJalal there would be no one who could deal with both (Iraqi PM) Maliki and the Iranians. The KDP-PUK rivalry remains strong in Kurdistan, particularly in sensitive areas such as Kirkuk where both parties are jockeying for power. A weakened or fractured PUK might help the KDP locally in the short term but longer term consequences for the KRG and Iraq could be destabilizing.

END COMMENT.

CROCKER